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Pietra

Bertha Lincoln Heustis





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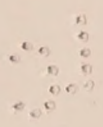
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no. 1.



PIETRO

PIETRO ate and slept and dreamed in
a desolate little garret up near the sky.
He never thought of being a hero, in fact he

never thought much about heroes, but he dreamed—and dreamed.

He came from the old country, Italy, not far from *Messina*.

His father had died when Pietro was only a child.

From his earliest boyhood his aim and ambition had been to supply the needs and necessities of life for his mother and the old grandmother, so they should never feel the lack of his father about the house, for Pietro idealized his father and thought of him as one of the saints he gazed at so wonderingly in the big colored window of the church.

Pietro was in love with Lucia, but she was an orphan and had no dowry except her beauty, her winsome smile, and merry laugh, and her devotion to Pietro, his mother, and the old grandmother.

He never thought of any other girl as he did of lovely Lucia; and she saw no pleasure in any day that brought not her Pietro. They had always played together and as children

they roamed the hills and planned and dreamed of a future that was theirs in partnership.

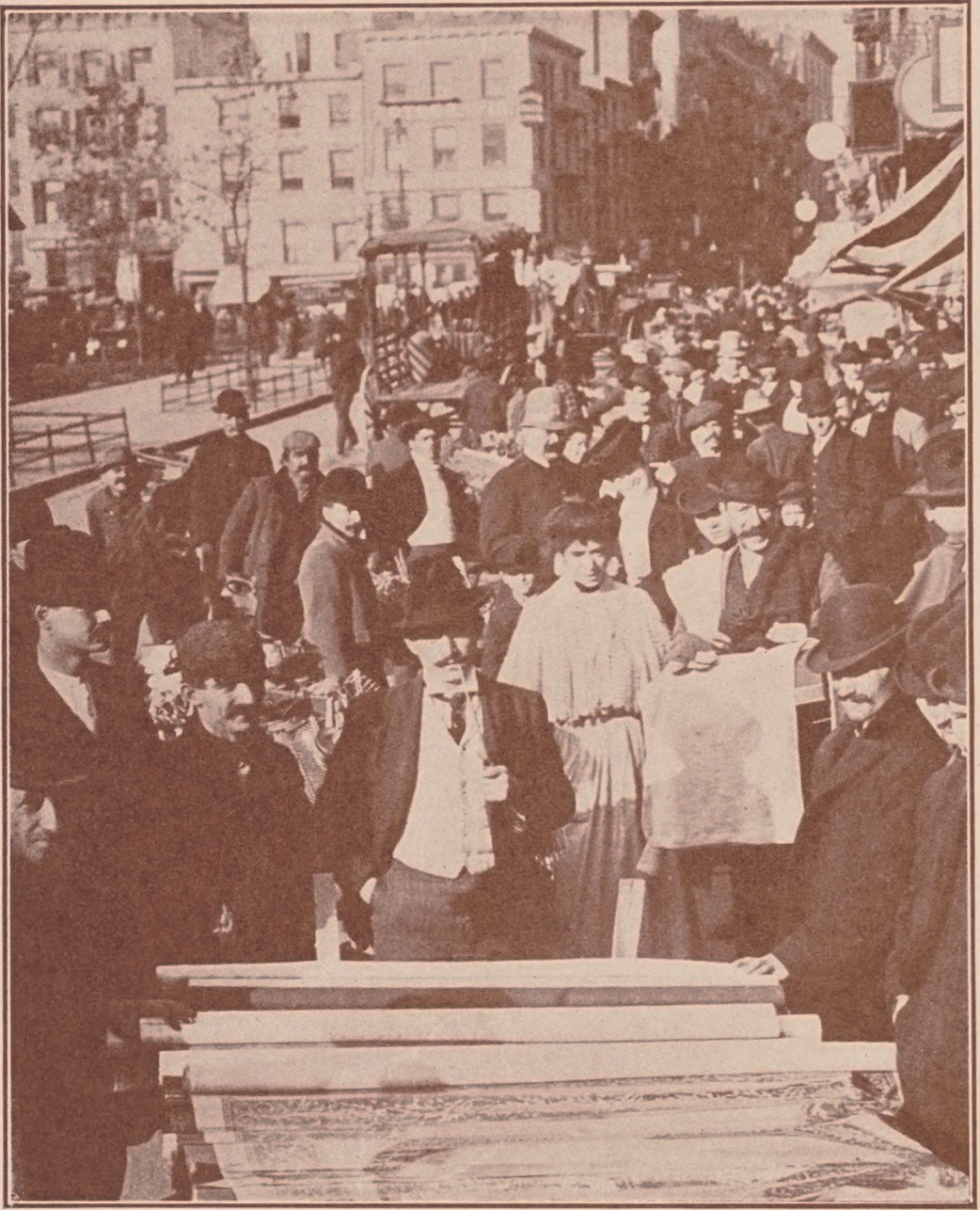
The future seemed very dark in sunny Italy, but one day, after gathering the fuel and preparing and storing away the food for the Winter, Pietro listened to a fellow countryman who told of big fortunes easily made in that wonderful land across the sea—America.



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This countryman of Pietro's induced a number of his associates to accept of his aid in getting passage to the marvelous world of glittering possibilities, for strange to say, he was the agent of those who often gather in young foreigners to bring them to Amer-

ica. The law does not exactly allow this, but men, and even big companies, find a way to



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evade the laws and it is in a measure a boon
to those who wish to leave the old home for
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the new, and have not the necessary funds to make the change.

After due delay, Pietro reached New York. Fate has many sides to its twistings and turnings, and the friendly agent fell into evil ways, and so Pietro was left, perhaps it was better so, to struggle all alone in his newly chosen homeland, for he knew not of the contract made for him.

New York wasn't at all like the place Pietro had pictured. He missed the sunny skies of Italy, for Pietro came in the early Winter and smoke from factories and chimneys everywhere hid the sun, and soon snow came that covered all the grass and flowers, and festooned the bare branches of the cheerless trees; but every one seemed too busy to bother with this poor heartsore, homesick boy from Italy. As cold as the frosty moonlit nights seemed all the hurrying crowds. There was no ease.

Every one pushed and jostled and there was so much poverty, so little joy and happi-

ness, and Pietro hated to have his countrymen see or know of his misery and distress, for he was full of ambitious pride, and so he walked the streets until his shoes were thin and he was thin, looking for employment.

He could not understand the strange American language, but after many weeks of disappointments, Pietro was discovered.

His constant wanderings about the city brought reward, for Pietro knew by hard experience his way about New York as well as if he was a native.

He was proud to write to Lucia, and the mother and the old grandmother, telling them he was working for the great country of America. And then he told them of his uniform. True, it was not gay like a soldier's, but his cap had letters on it. And it was much



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grander to be a servant of America than to have a fruit-cart or be a peddler. He did not explain that he couldn't sell anything as his purse had been too empty to buy and even one's countrymen refuse to trust.

Pietro failed to realize there was danger in his position.

He drove a big wagon that rushed with clanging bell through many streets and devious ways to homes of squalor or mansions of wealth.





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Pietro from his seat often saw men carrying hurriedly and putting in the wagon, white-wrapped forms on stretchers, but he did not ask why.

Proud indeed was Pietro to send his first gift of money back to Italy. Other similar offerings followed in rapid succession, for Pietro lived simply and denied himself every luxury. The deposits accumulated in his bank of happiness, and Lucia wrote that there would soon be enough laid by for all of them to come to beautiful America. She also wrote how lonely were the days without her handsome lover, for Pietro was good to look upon.

She wrote, too, of the long dreary evenings when they wished so much for him, and the sweet melodies he found hidden in the old violin. As he read, the tears shut out the words of the letter, as Pietro remembered the happy evenings when they were all together. The violin had been one the priest had given to him. How hard he had tried to play, and the good Father had shown him how to hold



the bow and the position for his hands so he could play the songs Lucia sang so sweetly.

Now that was all over. The violin was no

longer his—for one cannot eat songs, nor will music take the place of fire when one is cold; and only too well did Pietro know that cold and hunger tear joy and happiness from the heart, and so he had to part with his dear violin when there was nothing to eat in the house.

Then Pietro brushed away his tears to read his letter, and laughed merrily, for of course that was not the only violin in the whole big world, and some day he would play for his Lucia, if it would make her happier, and the waiting would only make the music and her songs the sweeter.

One day, a dreadful day, a letter came telling that the little store of money had been used to lay away the much beloved grandmother. Then began all over again the saving, the sending, and the accumulating.

It takes a long while to make enough to bring two loved ones from Messina to America, but Pietro sang and laughed, because the time was near when there would be enough to bring Lucia and the mother to their new home.

Then there came a day, as Pietro was waiting for orders, that a man in uniform—"Doctor" they called him, looked long and anxiously at Pietro—and then talked to another man in uniform, who also looked at Pietro, and then Pietro went on the boat, down the harbor.



It seemed a long and tiresome time to lie in bed surrounded by raving, dreadful-looking companions, but it was days before he learned that he was in the contagious hospital or Pest House, and that small pox was the trouble. He did not think much about it at the first, except that lying there so many weeks meant so much longer waiting for Lucia and the mother.

Then came the day when the little steamer took him back to New York. On the boat he passed a mirror, and, glancing in, saw not the old Pietro he remembered, but a face grotesque with scars and streaks of red. It frightened him, and he thought of Lucia, who once had said that she never would have loved him if he had not been so handsome. The thought struck terror to his heart, and in place of returning to his lodgings he wandered about the streets. No one would give him employment, and so the old trials began over again.

He who had been so happy was now forlorn. He slept in alley-ways, any place, ate anywhere. After weeks of weary wanderings, his



small store of money all exhausted, he found work as night watchman for a street contractor.

His pay was good, and soon he found he could sleep by day, and in the blackness of the night it little mattered how scarred and hideous was his face to passers-by.

One night there was a fiesta near where he was watching, and as the merry-makers passed, he noticed his old landlady among the number. Falteringly and tremblingly, he spoke to her



and asked her of Pietro. She, never recognizing him, said:

“Poor, poor Pietro, God rest his soul. How much happiness the good fellow missed! His mother and his promised wife came to my house almost the week he so suddenly disappeared. His Lucia,” she said, “had saved a woman’s life, and for it the lady’s husband had given Lucia much money, so that she and Pietro’s mother could come to America to make a home with him.”

“Where are they now?” Pietro asked.

The woman, with a shrug and laugh, answered “How should I know? They took Pietro’s things and paid what he owed, but my house was not grand enough for them;” and she passed on with the rest of the merry-makers.

Pietro dropped his head upon his hands and wept the whole night through. He trembled just to think of his Lucia so near and yet not to be with her, and then he trembled for fear she might discover him and his lost looks, for love he knew is sometimes killed by fright or shock, and children ran away from him. He

frightened them, and Lucia was little more than a child, so trusting, so lovable and sweet.

The nights grew into months and years, and then one cold and blustering Christmas eve, when there was joy and merriment in all the hearts about him, Pietro sat and watched the piles of brick, stacks of iron, and heaps of sand, his regular companions, for he was still night watchman.

Out of the peaceful stillness of the night he heard the warning sound that terrifies and grips many a stouter heart with fear and dread as a fire engine came tearing and rushing down the street. With that instinctive curiosity that impels one to follow after dreadful things, Pietro joined the crowd that soon gathered near the burning tenement.

He watched with horror, yet fascination, the removal of women, old men, and children, from the burning building.

Pietro had learned a little English during the long nights of watching, when the policemen and other prowlers of the night would

stop to talk or warm their hands by his small fire. He heard a woman ask in hushed and frightened tones, "Did they get the old Dago woman and the girl out of the third story back? I ain't seen 'em 'round." Then something gripped and clutched at Pietro's heart. He hated to be called a "Dago," for he was from Italy and not Dago-land. The thought seemed so hard that any one perhaps should speak of his Lucia and the mother as "Dago women," and then the thought full fraught with terror fairly stunned him—what if they should be the "Dago women" in the third story back?

To think was but to act with Pietro, for impulse is just as much a part of sunny Italy's gift to her children as the merry laugh and cheery nature. So Pietro, without stopping to consider anything except that his life was so very little to anyone except the gruff contractor for whom he watched each night, dashed through the crowd and smoke, throwing off the detaining hands of firemen and on-

lookers and ran into the burning tenement and up to the already smoking stairs in leaps and bounds, until he reached the door of the third story back.

The smoke was biting and his eyes were filled with tears, but when he opened cautiously the door he saw two figures, one sat huddled in a chair, while kneeling close beside with protecting arms enfolding her, was another.

Taking off his coat, he threw it over the head of the woman in the chair, because she seemed so helpless, old, and bent, though he could not see her face. The woman on the street had said they were "Dago women," so Pietro began speaking tenderly yet masterfully in the soft liquid tones of the homeland, tones that thrilled and gave courage to these poor panic-stricken ones. He caught at something on the nearby bed. It was a shawl, and tossing it to the kneeling woman, bade her cover her head and face closely, hold fast to his arm, to trust, and follow him.

Taking the woman from the chair in his arms, Pietro stumbled and almost fell, yet he held a guiding hand to the shawl-covered figure who followed close after him. Down one flight in safety, then half way down the second, and the cruel red gleaming hungry flames came licking up, almost engulfing poor Pietro, but he kept thinking: "They might call my Lucia and my old mother Dago women, and I'll save these women for their sakes."

There isn't much more to tell. Pietro reached the street, a hero. The two women were miraculously unharmed, while Pietro's hands and face had been burned by the searing flames.

Pietro, though a hero, fainted. When the pain was eased, and while his face and arms were swathed in bandages which tender, professional hands had placed there, he thought he dreamed.

It couldn't be reality, that Lucia and the mother were beside him. It seemed as if Lucia's dream spirit was caressing him and

telling him, with fond endearing words, how they had searched for him, watched for him, and waited. They had used the store of money they had brought, until necessity had compelled Lucia to work again at her fine knitting and the lace making, which Pietro had told her she should never have to do after she came to beautiful America, for she was to look into his eyes, and not at the bobbins and filmy threads of lace. Even the mother, to eke out existence, had made flowers for sale—flowers, such as she used to make to decorate the grotto of Pietro's Patron Saint.

He knew he must be dreaming, and the thoughts of Lucia helped him bear the long hours of waiting for recovery.

As he remembered that last walk together, the very afternoon before he left his Italy—Lucia rested in their favorite place on the old wall, and he repeated his hopes and ambitions to her while she smilingly listened. Her dear hands stopped knitting; and as he told again and again of his love and plans that would



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surely come true, she told him how she pitied all other girls who had no handsome lover like her own dear one.

Pietro knew that it is a sad disgrace in Italy if a girl shall not marry, and would Lucia, believing him dead, perhaps sometime listen to Tonio, who had one time boasted that he “could marry any girl he chose—even Pietro’s Lucia.” No, no, Lucia would have none of them, for she was true, and had promised she would wed no one but her own Pietro.

And he fancied that he heard a sweet voice whispering of love and hope, until one day came when Pietro knew that it was not a dream, but it was true. That Lucia and the mother dear were “the two Dago women” out of “the third story back” that he had saved.

Then followed such delicious days of convalescence when the doctors and nurses in the Hospital would allow his loved ones to make their visits. Then came the wretched thought and the horror of what Lucia would think when the kindly bandages which hid his loved ones from his sight and concealed his scarred and red-seamed face from them, should be re-

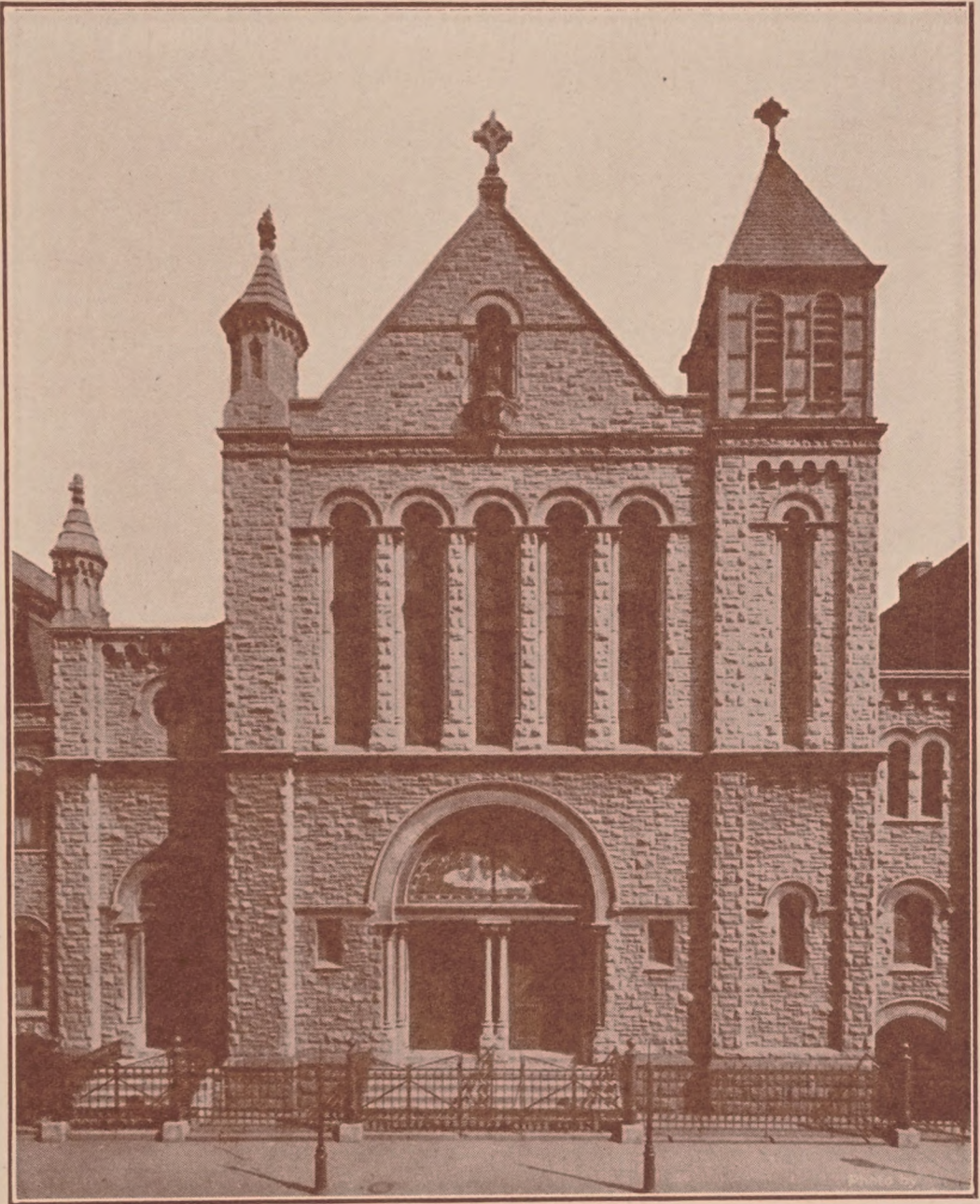
moved, and she would see his hideous face. What could he do? What should he do?

One day they came while he was asleep, and as he wakened, he heard them softly talking and heard his Lucia say—"Why, Mother, with his scars and burns won in saving us he is far handsomer than he ever was at home, for every scar is just a mark or badge of heroism, and I love them every one."

* * * * *



Lucia isn't making lace for sale now. Her last and most wonderful piece, which Pietro thinks is the most beautiful of all, was the christening robe for little Pietro, who was taken to the same church where Pietro and Lucia were wed—the Church of Our Lady of



Mt. Carmel, right up in the neighborhood where they live, on One Hundred and Fifteenth street.

The mother, the old mother, made the most marvelous of lovely flowers, not for sale, but used to decorate the home for the Christening feast, which was a wonderful affair—and the baby was given such wonderful gifts by people who had read about his father's heroism when he rescued "the two Dago women out of the third story back," as it was told in all the great newspapers, for everyone to know about it.

Outstretched helping hands, employment and sympathy awaited Pietro when he came from the Hospital, and even now his trials and heroism have not been forgotten.





The chief and firemen of the big engine were all at the Christening, and all promised to stand sponsors for little Pietro, and it was right they should, for the good priest said: "If it had not been for the fire, how would Pietro ever have found his Lucia and the little old mother in the third story back."



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